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Gorgan, Great Wall of

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The ‘Great Wall of Gorgan’, also, erroneously, known as ‘Alexander’s Wall’, runs from the south-east corner of the Caspian Sea for at least 195km eastwards, into the Elburz Mountains. Contrary to earlier hypotheses, it was not built under the Parthians, let alone the Macedonian king Alexander. Recent scientific dating places its construction firmly in the fifth or, possibly, early sixth century CE (Nokandeh *et al.* 2006), a period when the Sasanian Empire was involved in frequent armed conflicts with the Hephthalites. Shorter contemporary walls on the west and south coast of the Caspian Sea, notably the Derbent Wall and the Wall of Tamiše, suggest that the ‘Great Wall of Gorgan’ was part of a larger defensive system, also directed against enemies north of the Caucasus.

The Wall represents an impressive testimony to the standards of Persian engineering and land-surveying, and the Sasanian Empire’s (or its local aristocracy’s) ability to mobilise a substantial labour force. A water canal led along most of the Wall and it thus followed a route with a constant gradient. It forms the longest ancient linear barrier between central Europe and China, and over 30 forts about the Wall. Their combined size exceeds that of those on Hadrian’s Wall about threefold. Large barracks in their interior suggest a substantial permanent garrison. A rectangular fortress of 41ha size, 2km south of the Wall, with dense, though probably more transient, occupation around the time the Wall was built (and at least three similar campaign bases), provide further circumstantial evidence for the scale of Sasanian troop deployment on the Persian Empire’s northern frontier (Omrani *et al.* 2007-2008).

Whilst there is not yet enough evidence to be certain, scientific dates suggest that the Wall retained its garrison until the turbulent times of the early to mid-seventh century CE.

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Cross-references:

Caspian/Hyrcanian Sea and region
Caucasus mountain (less relevant and optional)
Hadrian's Wall (less relevant and optional)
Iran
Persia and Byzantium
Sasanids